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Biblical Symbols in the *Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by Franz Werfel

Abstract

Franz Werfel's historical novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933), set during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 in a village near Musa Dagh (mount in Southern Turkey) is deeply infused with Biblical symbolism that elevates its portrayal of suffering, resistance, and survival. This article argues that Werfel's Biblical symbols and allusions – ranging from Mount Musa Dagh as a modern-day Mount Sinai to Gabriel Bagradian as a Moses-like figure and some others – reinterpret the genocide through the Judeo-Christian lens. Applying the methodology of Intertextual Analysis and Reader-Response Theory within the Historical Context, the study demonstrates how these symbols transform collective trauma into a spiritually-resonant narrative of suffering, sacrifice for a greater cause, endurance, redemption, salvation, and finally – survival. In doing so, Werfel not only memorializes the Armenian plight, but also frames it within a universal moral tradition, deepening public understanding of genocide and resistance.

Keywords: Franz Werfel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, Historical Context, symbolism, Biblical symbols

Introduction

The Forty Days of Musa Dagh by Franz Werfel (1934) is a thrilling historical novel, which is based on true facts referring to the 1915 dark year of Genocide of Armenians, and particularly, to the Turkish effort of extermination of the Armenian population living in a small village near Musa Dagh – a mount overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. The protagonist Gabriel Bagradian returns from Paris to his native village of Yoghonoluk, to his *home, into the nest* (Werfel 1934: 4) with his French wife and son to resist the bloody enemy, to organize a self-defense and lead his 5,000 villagers to Musa Dagh, where, in the face of Turkish attacks, they struggled for 40 days ultimately to be evacuated by French warships.

The novel dramatizes the real-life Armenian resistance to the Ottoman Empire's genocidal campaign. Werfel's depiction, though fictionalized, is grounded in historical truth and profoundly enriched by a dense layer of Biblical symbolism. Hence, this article explores how Werfel strategically employs these Biblical symbols – not merely as literary decoration, but as essential interpretive keys that frame the Armenian Genocide within a Judeo-Christian moral and spiritual tradition. By drawing parallels between the Armenian plight and iconic Biblical narratives – Mount Musa Dagh as a modern Mount Sinai or Masada, Gabriel Bagradian as a Moses and Christ-like figure, and the people's struggle as a new Exodus – Werfel transforms the Genocide into a narrative of resistance, redemption, and spiritual survival.

The aim of this research is to analyze how these symbols function within the novel, why they are vital to its interpretation, and, crucially, what they reveal about the Armenian Genocide that traditional historical accounts often fail to express: the inner spiritual world of a people on the brink of annihilation, their resilience rooted in cultural memory and sacred archetypes. Grounded in Intertextual Analysis and Reader-Response Theory within its Historical Context, this study contends that Werfel's Biblical symbolism reframes genocide not only as a historical atrocity but as a metaphysical and moral crisis with enduring significance.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

As a work of fiction, the novel portrays creatively the emotional toll, courage, sacrifice and resilience of the people under siege and the atrocities committed against them, and, as a work of fiction it does this through numerous stylistic devices and expressive means. Among the literary tools used by the author, Biblical symbols are of great importance. Of no less importance are their analyses and interpretations which require application of specific methodology: Reader-Response Theory and Intertextual Analysis within the frames of *Historical Context*. The latter not only enables to understand the real historical period and the actual historical facts but also to comprehend the concerns, values and ideologies of the time reflected in symbols. Historical context gives certain symbols additional meanings and may alter the reader's interpretation significantly. The context surrounding symbols also includes the author's background and intentions. At large, the knowledge of the context provides "valuable insights into the symbolic significance of certain elements" (Jason 2020: 2). *Reader-Response Theory* as a method of research focuses on how readers interpret symbols as the perception of symbolism can become significant only through the readers' culture, experiences, beliefs and values. In other words, readers' individual and collective reactions and associations with the author and the symbols created by him, are very important in understanding them correctly. Finally, *Intertextual Analysis* makes it possible to disclose connections between the analyzed literary work and other works. Symbols carry meanings from other contexts, and their meanings are perceived when the two contexts are compared. In our case, Werfel's symbols imaginatively created in "The Forty Days of Musa Dagh" evoke Biblical references – allusions to important biblical characters and notions.

The analyses seek to offer a distinct contribution to literary and genocide studies by foregrounding Biblical symbolism as a critical interpretive lens in Werfel's novel. While prior scholarship has primarily focused on the novel's historical accuracy, nationalistic elements, or narrative structure, this study will

explore how Werfel employs Biblical symbols to recast the Armenian Genocide in a spiritually resonant and culturally universal framework. It will uncover symbolic parallels that elevate the Armenian resistance to a moral and redemptive narrative. This approach will not only deepen literary understanding of Werfel's work but will also stimulate new avenues for comparative scholarship in trauma literature and religious symbolism, thus inviting further research into how sacred archetypes can function as narrative strategies for communicating historical atrocity, and offering a framework applicable beyond Armenian history to other collective traumas.

Before passing to the interpretation of Biblical symbols in Werfel's novel, let us study the complex historical context within which the novel was created.

Historical Context: Musa Dagh and Franz Werfel

Historical Context is an approach to literary analysis which includes (1) explanation and comprehension of the social, economic, cultural, religious and political influences of the given historical period and place based on the concerns of the time and (2) the background of the author who has created the given literary work. Basically, it refers to details which make it possible to understand the history behind a work's creation, to the analysis, interpretation and appreciation of the author's intentions, the language, style and literary tools used in the narrative. Put another way, the specific time period in which a literary work is written, set and published is of utmost importance as “no work of literature can be fully appreciated or understood without historical context” (Fleming 2019: 3), and reading within historical context always provides “a powerful critical incentive” (Holsinger 2011: 593) motivating and encouraging researchers and readers to disclose meanings in the specific historical period on the background of the author's personality and activity.

The historical period of 1915 is well known for the deportation order of the Armenian population of Western Armenia (modern-day Turkey), issued in April by the Ottoman government. In July the order reached Musa Dagh (Mountain of Moses) region on the Mediterranean Sea (South of the port city of Alexandretta and West of the ancient Antioch) with its six Armenian villages. Of the thousands of villages and towns of the Ottoman Empire whose Armenian population was ordered to be deported to the Syrian desert, Musa Dagh was a place where Armenians organized the defense of their community against the edicts of the Young Turk regime. They put up a fierce resistance against the attempts of the outnumbered Turkish army with the hope to be rescued by an Allied vessel. One of the leaders of the revolt was named Movses – an Armenian first name that is the same as Moses. Eventually, five French warships of the third squadron transported the survived 3004 men, women and children of Musa Dagh to Port Said in Egypt on the 53-nd day of the siege. They remained in the Allied refugee camps until the end of the war and returned to Musa Dagh which was then under the French Mandate. In 1939 the area was incorporated by the Republic of Turkey, and the Musa Dagh Armenians abandoned their homes a second and final time (Adalian 2010: 449; Baum 2012: 92).

Referring briefly to Werfel's life and activity as the second component of Historical Context, it should be mentioned that Franz Werfel (1890–1945), the Austrian novelist, was born in Prague in a Jewish family, raised by a Czech Catholic governess and educated at a Catholic school. This expertise aroused in him interest in other faiths too, including Islam. His deep insight into comparative religion was

later reflected in his fiction and nonfiction works (Jungk 1990). Werfel served as a corporal and telephone operator in the Austro-Hungarian Army Artillery during World War I and as a propaganda writer in the Military Press Bureau in Vienna. He witnessed all the horrors of the war and stated in a prefatory note in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*: “The miserable sight of maimed and famished-looking refugee children, working in a carpet factory, gave me the final impulse to snatch the incomprehensible destiny of the Armenian people from the Hell of all that had taken place” (Werfel 1934: 3). Later he elaborated: “The struggle of 5,000 people on Musa Dagh had so fascinated me that I wished to aid the Armenian people by writing about it and bringing it to the world” (Bobelian 2009: 83). The 900-page novel, published in 1933, was banned in Germany and Turkey but the 1934 English translation made it a most readable novel in a couple of weeks. The novel’s importance is great for Armenians but it became equally important for Jews who readily saw the parallels – Musa Dagh and the Jewish ghettos in addition to resentment and persecution both nations suffered throughout history. The line from the novel – *to be an Armenian is an impossibility* (Werfel 1934: 878) and the Biblical parallels resonated well with the Jews (Auron 2000: 298) facing the horrors of Holocaust during World War II and served as a testament to endurance and survival for them.

Unveiling Biblical Symbols in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*

The belief that artistic literature can provide a greater understanding of reality than history itself is not misplaced in Werfel’s novel as it communicates the truth about the Armenian Genocide events in a creative way. Of course, much of the content of Werfel’s literary creation is based on fact, and to regain “a concept of what genocide is” – one must actually read it (Peroomian 2003: 284). However, as a work of fiction, it possesses the ability to blend various historical and personal accounts and to use emotional responses of individuals (the author included) to portray the reality and shed light on broader social and political phenomena (Edling and Ryden 2011; Dwyer 2021). Hence, the narrative and portrayal of real Turkish violence and Armenian resistance in Musa Dagh are altered to become more expressive through the author’s use of imagery and literary devices, religious and non-religious symbols among them.

Biblical symbols are present not only in sacred monograms, architectural designs, altars, crosses, stained glass and more (Cornwell and Cornwell 2009) but also in verbal art/literary works. Derived from the author’s own knowledge, thoughts, ideas, emotions, imagination, language, style and “motivated by the complex reality of life and the surrounding cultural background” – symbols create “diversity, uniqueness, and distinctiveness in every existing literary work” and lead to various interpretations by readers to understand the author’s profound intentions (Hoerotunnisa *et al.* 2024: 177). Symbols also express the figurative language of storytelling, elaborate and add deeper meanings and enrich the reader’s appreciation of the narrative. In other words, this literary device, as an extended metaphor or an allusion, creates concrete images widely open to interpretation. Hence, understanding Werfel’s impactful Biblical symbols is crucial in perceiving his purport and the meaning of his novel at large.

Now, let us refer to the most effective Biblical symbols created by Werfel in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* – “the true story of the Armenian resistance through a Hebrew prism: the chronicle of the exodus” (Von Voss 2007: 288).

Mount Musa Dagh as a Sacred Terrain

This powerful symbol, reminiscent of Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments, is an interesting blend of language and history. Its linguistic origin is the Arabic *Jebel Musa* which translates as *Moses' Mountain*; in Armenian it is *Musa Ler* (*Musa Mount*); in Turkish – *Musa Dagh* (*Musa Mountain*), thus preserving Moses' name in all three languages (Adalian 2010: 449). Y. Auron, the Israeli historian, scholar and expert in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, claims Musa Dagh is the Mount of Moses (Auron 2000: 296). The mount also parallels with the ancient Jewish fortress of Masada where the Jews resisted Roman forces. To both nations Masada or Musa Dagh symbolizes opposition to oppressors. Apparently, Werfel (1934) was well aware of the mentioned facts when he described the fascinatingly beautiful mountain as the ancestral home of Armenians, an integral part of their life and identity:

A golden, invisible humming seemed to have encased **the mountain**¹. Were these the vagrant swarms of the hives of Kebussiye, or was it the surge of the Mediterranean, audible in the bright transparency of the hour, eroding the naked back of **Musa Dagh**? (3)

To Gabriel Bagradian his **grandfather and Musa Dagh connoted the same**. [...] **the mount of his childhood, his father's country**. (7)

Twice already he had climbed **Musa Dagh** [...]. When a human being comes back to any former place of contemplation and inner life, **those spirits which he, the returned, once cherished and left there, return and eagerly possess him**. **The ghosts of Bagradian's childhood rushed upon him**, as though for twenty-three years they had waited faithfully under pines and rocks in this charming wilderness for him to return. (13)

On his return he decided that henceforth in all his journeyings he would not go beyond the farthest precincts of Musa Dagh. Some compelling magic emancipating from **the mountain of fathers**, becoming stronger the longer he stayed, forced him to this, [...]. (158)

It is also this sacred mount that brings Armenians together, consolidates and unites them, protects them, gives them courage and strength to resist persecution thus enabling a group of villagers to fight against the regular Turkish army units.

Gabriel believed he knew every bush and rock. [...] The limpid air of **Musa Dagh** contained a releasing element which seemed to bring close together, in a proximity neither had ever known.” (13)

The very essence of this mountain, eternal amid all these mutability, **seemed to renew Gabriel's strength and give him courage** for the torturing hither and thither of thoughts. (158)

No confusion, no losing of heads, no weeping or wailing. **Unity, resolution, discipline**. (197)

Our will must be clear and **unanimous**. (220)

They were **interwoven** with the very nature in which they lived. Their **hills were as much a part of them as their flesh**, so that to differentiate between outward and inward became impossible. Every leaf that stirred, every fruit that dropped, the rustling of a lizard, the faint splash of a far-off waterfall – these myriad stirrings had ceased to be mirrored by their senses; **they formed the very heart of**

¹ Emphasis added by the author unless otherwise noted.

those senses themselves, as though **each child were himself a little Musa Dagh**, creating it all within his own body. (346)

Musa Dagh has also been compared to the Jewish resistance in ghettos during World War II. An inmate and a defender of a Jewish ghetto suggested they should consider the ghetto their Musa Dagh and organize a collective resistance to be able to write a proud chapter in history about their movement (Glatstein *et al.* 1969). Thus, mount Musa Dagh symbolizing Mount Sinai and Masada – became a place of refuge and hope, a site of resistance against oppression (Alexander 2004). At large, Musa Dagh is a powerful symbol of *rebellion, endurance, resilience, and survival*.

The Exodus as a Narrative of Liberation

Werfel, drawing parallels with the Biblical Exodus, describes the Armenian flight to Musa Dagh (to their sanctuary) as the Israelites' escape from Egypt to the Promised Land. Both the Armenians and the Jews face persecution and seek freedom, they are determined to resist. Werfel's scenes of Armenian resistance echoing the Biblical Exodus include:

- the deportation resistance gathering at Musa Dagh (the Biblical gathering of Israelites at Mount Sinai);
- the fight for freedom oath (Israelites oath of defiance);
- the migration to Musa Dagh from the villages (Israelites departure from Egypt for the Promised Land);
- the forty-day siege and battles against Ottoman troops (Israelites forty years in wilderness and their desert wanderings);
- the final meal on Musa Dagh (the Biblical Last Supper before Jesus' crucifixion).

The scene from the novel where the Armenian villagers decide to ascend Musa Dagh directly echoes the Biblical narrative of the Jewish Exodus.

He, Bagradian also wanted **resistance**. **To the last drop of their blood**. He pointed in the direction of Musa Dagh whose picks, towering behind the roof, seemed to look down and **take part in the great assembly**. [...] **The people of Musa Dagh had decided to leave their homes**. They **would not submit** to deportation. They **would not be led away like sheep**. They **would fight for their freedom, for their right to exist**. They **would not be slaves**. (208)

The Exodus scenes are based on symbols that emphasize resilience, common goals, struggle, courage. At large, the Exodus adds to the novel's metaphorical significance through the symbols of *defiance, unity, liberation and freedom*.

Gabriel Bagradian: A Mosaic and Christ-like Figure

The protagonist Bagradian symbolizes Moses, the prophet. Bagradian's prototype was the Musa Dagh defense leader Moses Der-Kaloudsian whose first name (the same as the name of the mountain) might have inspired Werfel to create a Biblical Moses-like personality. As to the anthroponym *Gabriel*, Werfel

has not randomly given the name to his protagonist. It is a name of Phoenician, Hebrew and Aramaic origin: *El* means *God* and *gabr* means *man* in Canaanite (Iskandar 2022). Therefore, *Gabriel* means *a hero of God* or *a man of God*. The name also epitomizes the angel in the Bible, the one who tells Mary she will bear the son of God, Jesus. Hence, Bagradian can also be paralleled to Jesus Christ considering his actions that lead to sacrifice, redemption and salvation.

Both Bagradian and Biblical Moses grew up as strangers to their people and both guided their compatriots to self-defense and safety (Von Voss 2007: 288). Y. Auron (2000: 297) sees clear analogies between the two: Gabriel died on Musa Dagh and did not see the liberation of his people and Moses died on the Mount Nebo before his people could reach the Promised Land. F. Werfel himself discloses the symbol through an extended metaphor when he writes in the novel: *The mountain was their ark, and the sea was the Turkish army. They had no Moses, but they had Gabriel Bagradian* (Werfel 1934: 348). This quote shows that Werfel is drawing another Biblical parallel too – Musa Dagh signifies Mount Ararat and the Armenian plight during the Genocide signifies the Biblical story of Noa’s Arc. Thus, Musa Dagh is a sanctuary akin to Noah’s ark. Mount Ararat, the iconic symbol in Judeo-Christian tradition, is the place where Noah’s Ark landed after the Great Flood as described in the Book of Genesis.

Through the character of Gabriel, Werfel speaks of a leader’s ability to inspire resistance, of a leader’s thoughtfulness and responsibility towards his people, of a leader’s rationality and military expertise in the attempt to guide people to safety.

Gabriel had passed a great many sleepless nights **thinking out these directions for escape** – rejecting altering, taking up again. (231)

He was **less rhetorical, more exact**. They must never, he urged them, waste a second, eat one unnecessary mouthful; **must concentrate every pulse-beat on the one aim**. [...] They despise us as a set of merchants and always boast of being soldiers. If we **beat them** once, we shall have poisoned their self-esteem and given them the lesson they’ll never get over. (238)

Whatever Gabriel and Aram had been thinking at this time, they **insisted again and again on the glorious outcome of resistance** hammering **fanatical belief** and more important still **fanatical discipline** into young impressionable minds. (238)

The most essential part of defense had naturally not been thought as one vaguely uniform mass; Gabriel had split it up **strategically** into definite sections of ten men each, that is to say, **minute battalions** which could be moved and disposed independently. (239)

The Gabriel symbolism is rich and powerful: akin to Biblical Moses Gabriel Bagradian epitomizes *will-power, faith, intellect, defiance, endurance, courage and survival*.

The Sacrificial Lamb as Death and Dignity

The symbolism of sacrifice and the concept of the Sacrificial Lamb refer to the Biblical theme of the Passover Lamb which was sacrificed to make the Israelites’ deliverance from Egypt safe and successful. In Werfel’s novel the Lamb symbol functions in a somewhat different way. The Armenians of Musa Dagh, on the one hand, do not want to be massacred like the Lamb, however, on the other hand, they adhere to the Biblical truth of sacrifice for a greater cause. This means the symbol of Sacrificial Lamb consists of certain

layers: (1) self-sacrifice (in the face of the threat of annihilation the Armenians of Musa Dagh resist their fate and choose to fight); (2) innocence (like a naïve lamb they do not understand why they have to suffer the genocidal slaughter); (3) redemption (facing and fighting the enemy they seek redemption).

The concept of the Sacrificial Lamb is vividly exemplified through Gabriel whose selflessness, dedication to the cause and dignity in the face of death embody the suffering and death of a person for the sake of others. Through the character of Gabriel Werfel suggests that only by fighting back could the Armenians maintain their dignity and resist dehumanization (Dwyer 2021: 10).

We have only **the choice between two deaths**, between easy death in battle, or **a mean and terrible death by massacre**. (447)

By fighting, we cease to be just manure, rotting somewhere round the Euphrates. By fighting we **gain honor and dignity**. (705)

Therefore, it can be stated that in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* the Sacrificial Lamb symbolizes *resistance, defiance, courage, endurance, dignity, honor, justice and sacrifice for a greater cause*.

Resurrection: Spiritual Survival and National Rebirth

Explicitly or implicitly, resurrection is reflected in many impactful lines of the novel. The struggle of Musa Dagh Armenians, their resilience, hope rising from despair and their rescue are symbols of resurrection of Christ.

May Armenia have great future and **a glorious resurrection**. (517)

To the old man, it felt as though he were walking through clouds of ashes, the thick death-cloud of the whole burnt-up **Armenian race rising between time and eternity**. (672)

Resurrection is the symbol of *survival and rebirth* of Musa Dagh Armenians, and of all Armenians after the 1915 Genocide.

In November 1935 when Franz Werfel visited the US, he was asked if what he described in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* was the truth. The writer replied, “More than the truth; because an epic represents the truth colored by imagination. An epic written by a true poet contains more reality than a history written by a historian” (in Hairenik Weekly, 1935). Werfels “epic of truth” is reflected in his fascinating Biblical symbols which depict real places, real people and real events in a most creative way, thus revealing authenticable truths about Armenian Genocide.

Conclusion

Franz Werfel’s *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* transcends its historical subject matter by embedding the 1915 Armenian Genocide within a framework of Biblical symbols that deepen its moral and emotional resonance. This study has shown that symbols such as Mount Musa Dagh (as a sacred and redemptive terrain), the Exodus (as a metaphor of collective liberation), Gabriel Bagradian (as a Mosaic and Christ-like leader), the Sacrificial Lamb (as a dual symbol of innocence and chosen defiance), and Resurrection

(as a metaphor for national rebirth) are not incidental – they are the interpretive heart of the novel. Through these symbols, Werfel does more than recount a historical event – he universalizes it, giving voice to the spiritual magnitude of Armenian suffering and survival. These Biblical allusions reveal dimensions of the genocide that might otherwise remain inaccessible: the existential choices between submission and dignity, the sanctity of collective resistance, and the enduring hope for resurrection amid catastrophe. By interpreting the genocide through this sacred lens, Werfel not only memorializes the Armenian experience but also appeals to a broader moral conscience, making Musa Dagh a literary testament to humanity’s enduring struggle for meaning in the face of atrocity.

In summary, through Biblical symbols the author characterizes and portrays people and events, thus impacting the reader emotionally and contextualizing the Genocide to enhance the true understanding of its unthinkable atrocities. Through impactful Biblical symbols he creates concrete images that are widely open to interpretation and give the reader a chance to perceive the meaning of his novel better.

The imaginative symbols of Armenian resistance in Musa Dagh that evoke and carry Biblical connotations are the following:

- Musa Dagh as a powerful symbol of endurance, resilience, and survival.
- The Exodus as a symbol of defiance, unity, liberation and freedom.
- Gabriel Bagradian as an epitomizer of will-power, faith, intellect, defiance, endurance, courage and survival.
- The Sacrificial Lamb as a symbol of resistance, defiance, courage, endurance, dignity, honor, justice and sacrifice for a greater cause.
- Resurrection as the survival and the rebirth of Armenians including Musa Dagh Armenians.

Thus, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by Franz Werfel intwines Biblical symbolism into its narrative accentuating themes of faith, resilience, defiance, sacrifice and survival.

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